DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 431 CS 510 510

AUTHOR Fassett, Deanna L.
TITLE "You Get Pushed Back": The Social Construction of Educational Success and Failure and Its Implications for Educational Reform.
PUB DATE 2001-02-00
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western States Communication Association (72nd, Coeur d'Alene, ID, February 23-27, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Academic Failure; Communication Research; *Educational Change; Educational Research; Higher Education; Interviews; *Student Role
IDENTIFIERS Communication Patterns; *Social Construction; Students as Subjects

ABSTRACT

One of Matt Groening's popular cartoons offers two different perspectives regarding the purpose and value of formal education in America: "Bongo's" belief that a good education must consist of an engaging classroom environment and proper emotional, intellectual, and structural resources; and "Bongo's" father's belief that a good education is a completed education. The way in which these two characters engage in discussions of education is not all that different from the ways in which student participants (two groups of students enrolled in an introductory speech communication course and two groups of graduate teaching assistants enlisted to teach the introductory communication course) in a study engaged such discussions, or even, for that matter, the way in which any set of two or more people might discuss educational issues. This paper seeks to illuminate the processes by which mundane understandings of educational success and failure may complicate educational reform. Findings demonstrate that participants: (1) did not offer stable and uniform definitions of educational success and non-success, suggesting that these experiences are constructs, built rather than given; (2) in (re)constructing their definitions of educational success and nonsuccess, articulated understandings of themselves as apart from or outside the creation and maintenance of social systems; (3) in establishing a sense of themselves as apart from the workings of social systems, seemed to create for themselves a sense of personal empowerment; (4) while they worked to articulate their individual agency, constructed definitions which served to reinscribe the power of those social forces they perceive to be beyond their control; and (5) by communicating in ways that elide their participation in social systems, ensured that they are unable to change those systems. Contains 6 notes and 42 references. (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original document.

ED 450 431

"You get pushed back": The social construction of educational success and failure and its implications for educational reform

Deanna L. Fassett, Ph.D.

Dept. of Communication Studies
San José State University
One Washington Square
San José, CA 95192-0112
(408) 924-5511
dfassett@email.sjsu.edu

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
D. L. Fassett
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Paper presented to the Communication and Instruction Division, Western States Communication Association, Annual Conference, Coeur D'Alene, Idaho, February 2001

CS 510 510

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"You get pushed back": The social construction of educational success and failure and its implications for educational reform

The American educational system has always been subject to some form of critique, whether from philosophers and educational theorists, corporations and other prospective employers, popular media, teachers, students, or parents. Popular cartoonist Matt Groening, although not explicitly linked to educational reformers like John Dewey or Paulo Freire, is no stranger to educational critique. His creative work, gathered into collections with titles like School is Hell (1987), offers images—bitter to some, critical to others—of education. While these images are rendered in black and white, the educational world they depict is less so; in Groening's educational world, not so unlike our own, teachers are unwilling or unable to care, students are subject to the oppressive weight of institutional traditions, and quiet conformity is privileged over curiosity and creativity. One such cartoon (Groening, 1993) shows a schoolage rabbit character named Bongo who answers his father's question—"how was school today?"—not with an account of pleasant activities, but rather a grim assessment of the lessons he's learned. He replies,

> ...My classroom is packed to the gills with confused, neglected kids. Because of budget cutbacks, the school library is closed, which nobody notices because nobody reads. The school building is falling apart, we've got no art supplies, there's a chalk shortage, and the one outdated computer is broken. The teachers are stressed out because of the long hours, the overcrowding and the latest pay cuts. The kids alternate between giddiness and stupefaction, waiting for the bell to ring. We have no sense of logic, no historical awareness, no analytical skills, no command of the language, and the attention span of a gnat. So I'm thinking of dropping out.

Bongo's response is, in itself, not particularly humorous. Instead, the punchline arrives with Bongo's father's reply—"But, without a good education, your life will go nowhere." This statement reflects a tacit American assumption (i.e., achieving the requisite diploma is necessary if one is to secure lucrative or satisfying employment). To extend this idea, then, education becomes a phase through which a child must persevere if her/his life is to go somewhere; s/he must continue at all costs, even if the costs may mean depression and loss or censorship of critical expression.[1]

Groening's depictions of Bongo's experiences, while fictional, are suggestive of the ways in which students may find it difficult to take control of their own lives. To be asked to succeed

in an educational environment where budget cutbacks preclude adequate school supplies, viable teacher salaries, reasonable classroom sizes, and safe buildings is overwhelming. It is likely that Bongo's experiences with education are not what Americans would prefer for their children; these experiences do not match with what constitutes a "good education." Yet these experiences are similar to, and even charitable in comparison with, the daily experiences of far too many children in American schools.[2]

Groening's cartoon is significant in that it raises several questions: (1) What constitutes a "good" education? (2) Just what exactly is a life that "goes nowhere?" And, perhaps most importantly, (3) who decides which lives are going "nowhere" and which are going "somewhere?" What criteria does this person use? Whose "somewhere" is privileged? Do the students, the people whose very lives are in question, have a say in this assessment? Such questions point to the very difficulty of understanding and challenging or re-envisioning educational failure: we (writ large—everyone from students to teachers to taxpayers to politicians) must engage in open and on-going dialogue regarding education's purpose and function in American society. The irony of Groening's cartoon lies in his ability to capture one of the central difficulties regarding educational failure: that a student's failure to complete her/his education and the educational system's failure to meet the needs of diverse student populations are intertwined.

Groening's cartoon, in addition to serving as a provocative foil for discussions of what constitutes educational risk, is an apt illustration of social construction of educational understandings. In this cartoon, Groening offers two different perspectives regarding the purpose and value of formal education in America: (1) Bongo's belief that a good education must consist of an engaging classroom environment and proper emotional, intellectual and structural resources, and (2) Bongo's father's belief that a good education is a completed education. The final frame of the cartoon shows the two characters in a stalemate over how one should assess the success of formal education—the <u>how</u> (i.e., teaching methods, access to resources, caring relationships with instructors and peers) or the <u>that</u> (i.e., completion).

The way in which these two characters engage discussions of education is not all that different from the ways in which the participants in this study engaged such discussions, or even, for that matter, the way in which any set of two or more people might discuss educational issues over a cup of coffee, at a conference, or in a boardroom. This is to say that conversations about

education invoke, evoke and reinforce our own most deeply held assumptions and beliefs about the nature and value of that education. When Bongo's father tells him that "without a good education, your life will go nowhere," he not only implies that a good education is a completed education, but that a person needs formal education for her or his life to go somewhere. He does not question this belief in the value of formal education, nor does he reflect upon how, or from whom, he has learned this belief. Furthermore, he does not question the ways in which, through unreflectively expressing this belief to his son, he helps to (re)establish the normativity of his belief. He does not seem to be aware that his belief in a "good education" is learned rather than given, a product of culture and history rather than timeless and universal. This is not all that different from the opinions expressed by the participants in this study; even as they express their struggles with the educational system, they still privilege others' assessments in deciding whether someone is academically successful. Even as they make these decisions, foregrounding individuals significant to their developing understandings, they still perceive themselves to be struggling against a nebulous and unassailable institution—one they are unable to influence and change.[3]

In this essay, I hope to illuminate the processes by which mundane understandings of educational success and failure may complicate educational reform. First, that participants did not offer stable and uniform definitions of educational success and non-success suggests that these experiences are constructs, built rather than given. Second, participants, in (re)constructing their definitions of educational success and nonsuccess, articulated understandings of themselves as apart from or outside the creation and maintenance of social systems (i.e., they did not understand their participation in these systems to reinforce the valuing of grades or existing job market standards and demands). Third, participants, in establishing a sense of themselves as apart from the workings of social systems, seemed to create for themselves a sense of personal empowerment (i.e., they could simply choose whether or not to attend class or submit an assignment). Fourth, while participants worked to articulate their individual agency (and the influences of significant individuals in their educational lives), their definitions serve to reinscribe the power of those social forces they perceive to be beyond their control. And, fifth, by communicating in ways that elide their participation in social systems, participants ensure that they are unable to change those systems.

In this particular study I have engaged the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do students and teachers understand educational failure? How are these understandings socially, communicatively constructed?

RQ 2: Correlatively, how do students and teachers understand educational success? How are these understandings socially, communicatively constructed?

RQ 3: How do these discursive understandings shape students' and teachers' understandings of each other and the educational system?

In order to answer these questions, I recruited and interviewed four different focus groups[4] of participants (i.e., two groups of students enrolled in the introductory speech communication course and two groups of graduate teaching assistants enlisted to teach the introductory communication course).

Participant understandings of educational success and failure

Success as Internal Construction

One of the ways in which the participants in this study conceptualized success was to describe it as a matter of internal, personal, and private assessment. In this way, a successful student is successful if she or he believes her or himself to be so, according to her or his unique criteria (i.e., a sense of personal fulfillment, variously attained). Participants describe this in a variety of ways:

> Who's determining what's success? I mean, they can get good grades. They can have the admiration of their teachers. They can have all of that and does it still mean much to them? (Neil, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> I have a problem with some of the definitions of being successful because a student's goal may not necessarily be to get a degree… I think it's an individual goal-oriented thing (Lazarus, GTA group, 3/24/99).

> Sometimes, to me, the good student and the successful student…and I agree with all that you've said. But the good student knows her or his own limits in terms of—they know what they can put into my class. They have a good sense of "Ok, I've got chemistry. I've got this horrible history thing and I hate history but I've got to like pass this." They know what they're here for, and they know how to value the classes. So, I have a student who is getting like a C in my class or even a D but has, like, survived the semester and really succeeded in the classes that she or he wanted to do well in. And sometimes I think all of us need to make that choice. What is going to be the priority along this line? And for some, that's just paying the bills. (Lucas, GTA group, 3/24/99).

> It is like to me individual. If you go to class, you know, maybe like once or twice a week, get the basic idea, and then study on your own and cut class, you pull off like B's. I mean, maybe you can do average without even working very hard. That might be your success, you know. (Andi, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> I think success is pretty much what you consider to be happy (Chase, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> [Being a successful student means] walking away and actually learning something. I have had classes where I pulled off an A, and I don't know jack by the time I leave… I haven't learned anything, and to me, what good does having a degree or a diploma in hand if by the time you get out in the real world, you are completely lost? (Nastasja, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> I think it's like different for everybody like they—one might define success differently as being content, or more the outside goals or something. (Yessica, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

This understanding of academic success is characterized by personal measurement—that is, whether a person is satisfied with how she or he is achieving particular educational goals. Although this perspective was held by both graduate teaching assistants and undergraduates, the latter tended to express this perspective more frequently. As I will address later in this study, graduate teaching assistants often addressed various degrees of compliance with institutional structures (e.g., submitting assignments, attending classes, adhering to grading and degree progress standards); however, when graduate teaching assistants did so, it was often with equal concern for students' abilities to understand and critically read the history and motives behind such practices.

Success as External Construction

Participants also characterized educational success in a second, more external manner. From this perspective, success is measured by achievement in light of other pre-established criteria—e.g., progress toward a degree, high marks in a class, satisfying a given teacher or teachers, finding employment upon graduation, and so on. The following examples demonstrate the ways in which other forces, external to the individual, serve as indicators or measures of success.

> It is going to be very hard for me to consider a student successful if the person fails the course. We have personal goals, and you are going to find yourself to be very ridiculous if you fail a couple of courses and got F's and say I was a successful student

> because society has a measure of success and the teacher also wants to cite you as an example of a successful student. You can be a diligent student and an enthusiastic student, but you did not make the grade (Frank, GTA group, 3/10/99).
>
> I share with Felix the understanding or the location of the success in being able to meet sort of outside criteria on the part of the students. I guess I would also want [to add]…being able to adapt to different situations in the classroom or with homework…because I think some classes or types of programs require you to be able to connect interpersonally with classmates and with the teacher, whereas others, other classrooms expect you not to do that as much. And, being able to know how to do what in each situation is something that is hard to learn sometimes (Leo, GTA group, 3/10/99).
>
> I derive the word success from what I know from the system. I said what's successful, well, doing well, and where do I trace that back to? Well, I trace that back to society and what's successful in society (John, GTA group, 3/24/99).
>
> My major is a technical major; so, if I'm not successful in school, there is no way I would be successful in the field because architecture takes the skills you learn in class. I mean, you may expand on those skills, but you need to be successful in the class itself (Andi, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).
>
> I think it's really a matter of having that piece of paper saying you've done this and you've done that (Taylor, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).
>
> …the way the grading system is set up, it, it is pretty much just doing what you're asked to do (Chase, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

This understanding of educational success is, therefore, characterized by external assessment from any number of interested and disinterested others. Society is frequently invoked by participants, as is the case with Frank and John above, as a standard for determining one's relative academic success. However, in order to learn about more specific influences (e.g., the relative importance of friends or family to one's understanding of academic success), I needed to ask frequent probing questions, something that, given the unique strengths and limitations of each interviewing method, was easier to accomplish in the one-to-one interviews.

This is not to suggest that participants do not combine the two perspectives, either by holding them in tension, or by advocating different perspectives at different times in the interview. For example, when Dean states "you need to pass. You need to get that degree. You need to learn what you need to learn, but you need to learn how to apply it to what you want to do," he is combining both views (undergraduate group, 4/7/99). He suggests that while there are

certain external criteria a student needs to satisfy (i.e., "pass," "get a degree"), the student must also pursue a personally desirable end (i.e., "what you want to do"). Similarly, when Joe states that "a student who graduates from college in a reasonable amount of time in the major they have some interest in and gets out of here is a success," he is demonstrating a mix of external and internal, or personal, criteria (GTA group, 3/24/99). Most participants, however, found it difficult to reconcile the two perspectives.

It is also important to note that this systemic construction of educational success is also characterized by an air of compliance—the willingness to get "that piece of paper," to "make the grade," to "adapt to different situations," or do "what you're asked to do." This general satisfaction with accomplishing pre-established goals stands in marked relationship to the equally pervasive concern for authenticity, for students and teachers to genuinely care about each other, the subject matter, and the method of instruction.

"Just doing what you're asked to do": Compliance, passion, and other motivations

Another theme that threads through the participant interviews for this study involves motivations (i.e., a person's motivation for becoming or remaining a student or teacher). For graduate teaching assistants, this issue emerged around notions of authenticity. This is to say that teachers spent large portions of interview time engaged in discussion of students' "actual" or "real" feelings for learning. For example, when Wendy describes a successful student, she argues that this student must possess "curiosity and a real desire to be there" (GTA group, 3/24/99). Similarly, when Felix attempts to distinguish between a successful and an unsuccessful student and asks, "Is that student just going through the motions and not really caring or engaging with the material as opposed to [another] student who kind of shows a little passion but maybe hasn't learned the comma splice rule yet?," he is referring to a pervasive tension expressed to greater or lesser degree by all participants (GTA group, 3/10/99). In effect, what sort of student should a teacher privilege—the student who is effortlessly going through the motions or the student who passionately, but perhaps inadequately, engages the course curriculum? Similarly, what sort of teacher should the student privilege—the teacher that, again, is going through the motions, or the one that cares passionately about the subject matter and about the students?

A brief series of examples illustrates that whether students genuinely care about classroom learning is a matter of great concern to the teachers I interviewed:

> I think that you have to want to be a successful student. There are students who go to college because they are forced to or it is the right thing to do, but not necessarily want to learn. In order to be successful, you have to want to learn. You have to want to be there (Francis, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> Something I was thinking about is how I approach or how I receive students who have sort of like a consumer view to college education. "I'm paying for this class, or you should give me this because I'm here." And I think they look at education as a product rather than an experience, and then I find myself getting irritated with that. I tend to think of the fact that they're buying dorm space and they should be given a room, but you're purchasing access to… education. You have to be engaged in learning to get the grade that you want (Robin, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> I think a successful student is curious (Lucas, GTA group, 3/24/99).

As these participants suggest, it is important for a student to genuinely appreciate what she or he is learning, and demonstrate this appreciation, this inquisitiveness, this curiosity to her or his instructor. Though, as Felix notes, this is not a simple assessment: Wouldn't even the most motivated, engaged student need to meet the demands of both instructor and institution?

The teachers I interviewed noted that, in order for a student to be successful, they must also achieve at least some expertise in meeting the needs of both instructor and classroom. This may mean developing an awareness of different instructional methods and mastery of different means of assessment, or it may mean simple compliance with daily activities—e.g., keeping up with course readings, attending class, submitting assignments, and so on. For example:

> On a very basic level, [successful studenting means] going to class almost every time, if not every time. Sort of being there, doing the reading. Taking notes and learning how to take notes. Learning how to read. Learning how to effectively have your body in the classroom (Felix, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> [A successful student] is someone who is able to understand how tests work and how to answer the types of assignments and types of questions we ask in our classes… [An unsuccessful student has] an unwillingness or inability to really work hard in trying to pick the teacher's mind about what they're looking for in class or on assignments. (Leo, GTA group, 3/10/99)

In the interviews with teachers, participants often couched this attention to minimum standards of student compliance in discussions of student excuses. For example:

> A student came to me, and he has missed three things. He has missed a speech, he's missed both, two probes, and he said to me, "Well, I did both probes. The first one I lost in the computer, and the second one is in my bag in my room right now. I promise." And then the speech, you know, it's in the mail system coming to me right now as I speak. And so I said, you know, there's a problem here. [Group Laughter] All of these you have done supposedly. You did all the work for this, yet one is in the mail system, one is in your room, and one is gone in the bowels of a computer. There is a problem here, you know, and…obviously he never owned it. He never owned responsibility for that. It was always the mail system's fault. It was always my dad's fault. It was always my roommate's fault. I don't know. He gave incredible excuses. (John, GTA group, 3/24/99).

> [Some] students…have so many excuses for not typing their work, for not proofing their work, for not coming to class. I think that they are not full-time students. They have other engagements, and I kind of think they are not likely to be successful. I don't expect too much from such students. (Frank, GTA group, 3/10/99).

As both comments suggest, the daily details of classroom management are a matter of some concern for many of the graduate teaching assistants I interviewed for this study. However, these comments also suggest that a student's non-compliance with instructor expectations for compliance carries serious consequences. As Frank states, "I don't expect too much from such students." This begs the question: what happens to students who do not effectively perform compliance for their instructors? Moreover, in order to be a successful student, in light of these comments, one must possess a genuine love of learning as well as both a willingness and an ability to comply with instructor standards. However, embedded in this desire for students' compliance, the graduate teaching assistants in this study expressed a desire for students to be aware or reflective of the system in which they are participating. For example, when Leo suggests that the successful student is someone who understands how tests work, he is advocating something beyond simply suggesting that a successful student performs well on tests. Instead of foregrounding grades, Leo foregrounds the successful student's ability to recognize the logic within different forms of testing and to act accordingly.

The undergraduates I interviewed for this study expressed a different understanding of their role as student. While students were aware of what they perceived to be obligations to work within external criteria (e.g., to attend class, to pass certain classes in order to receive a degree, to earn a degree in order to find employment), the undergraduates I interviewed did not, for the most part, articulate an understanding of a successful student as one who genuinely

enjoys learning. These participants primarily (though certainly not exclusively) identified clearly defined, easily measured educational goals, such as to earn a particular degree or to make the Dean's list. Similarly, these students tended to define educational success as a process of goal-setting and achieving. This suggests a reciprocal relationship between students' educational goals and their understandings of educational outcomes such as success or failure. Correlatively, participants typically described non-success in terms of waste—as in wasting time, wasting money—and misplaced priorities. For example:

> [A successful student] sets goals and then accomplishes those goals… You know, like you are going to get your Master's, or you're going to get your Bachelor's, any degree that you actually go out and get instead of giving up when things get too hard. I think the unsuccessful student would be one that has their priorities wrong. Not really wrong, but… Going to parties is good, but, you know, when they party excessively, without, you know, and they paid all this money, and it is a waste of money… Don't go to class, don't really do the homework. (Gwen, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> I think those who fail to plan, plan to fail, or something like that. They [unsuccessful students] don't have any goals. (Taylor, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> The unsuccessful person, or student I should say, is just the student who doesn't give a damn… It doesn't even matter to me what grades they get. Maybe they are going by with C's or stuff, but, you know, if they don't really give a darn about what they're doing in life, I mean, that just doesn't amount to anything. That is just self-defeating in and of itself. (Nastasja, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

While the undergraduate students and graduate teaching assistants both indicated a concern for each other's motivations, both groups also articulated a definition of student success as one in which the student meets or exceeds standards external to her or himself. The graduate teaching assistants, however, differ from their undergraduate counterparts in advocating a definition of student success that also includes a particular student motive—an individual's desire to learn. Furthermore, graduate teaching assistants, while advocating an understanding of student success that includes student compliance with external criteria, underscore that the successful student also appreciates the nature of that compliance. This is to say that the graduate teaching assistants in this study did not want "automatons," students who are content to merely comply with rules, but rather students who engage and interrogate both the content of the course and the nature of the social and academic systems in which that course is enveloped.

"You get pushed back": Individuals, systems, and other important factors

Another prevailing theme across all the interviews for this study involved a tension between the influences of individuals and the influences of social systems on students' and teachers' formative and developing understandings of educational success and nonsuccess. In addition to environment and community, participants also identified the importance of family, peers, teachers, the popular media and other factors or models in their developing understandings. In these next two examples, participants draw attention to the importance of the community or environment in which they were raised as a significant factor in the development of their beliefs about educational success:

> I would say environment influences what is successful or unsuccessful. What's going on around you? What's happening? Who are the people you see in your environment who are seen as nonsuccessful?... How does the community view that university? Do they view that university as a means to gain something so that they can become successful? (Daphne, GTA group, 3/24/99).

> I know that some of my friends were reared in the idea that my father makes a lot more money than your father does. So he is a success. My rearing was most definitely the opposite of that. It was: Do you have a good, solid family? Do you have faith? Do you love your parents? Do you have good friends that you can trust? I think that is the difference between even people in my peer group and me, and so I think that definitely shapes, the socialization that you receive when you're young (John, GTA group, 3/24/99).

Implicit in these communities, or environments, are a variety of people, people who have modeled for participants potential educational outcomes. Participants described role models—whether positive or negative in influence, whether the participant was compelled or resisted behaving like these models—as influential to their responses in the interviews. For example:

> When you're with your friends, and you're all kind of trying to do the same thing, you always remember the one person who like falls, you know? (Nastasja, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> I think also too you see people older than you, see how they're successful, and then you see how they got there, and then that's what you structure—(Gwen, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> Or even seeing a person that's older than you that isn't successful, and you don't want to be like them (Paige, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> My dad, originally, he didn't have much. Like we lived across the street from the projects for like, when I was a kid…but we moved to like one of the most exclusive neighborhoods because he had the guts to go and ask a guy at a car dealership for money (Chase, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

While participants described role models as formative in their developing definitions of educational success and nonsuccess, yet another series of excerpts illustrates the significance of personal experience within the educational system for these definitions. For example, in the following excerpts, participants discuss the ways in which they have learned by reflecting upon their own prior experiences and what they perceive to be personal mistakes:

> You learn how to be unsuccessful. I remember things from high school that, well I didn't necessarily learn, I wish now that I would have paid more attention or something (Andi, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

> I learned as much from mistakes in my life as I do from listening to other people tell me what I need to be doing or what I should not be doing. I learn just as much from my own life experiences (Paige, undergraduate group, 3/31/99).

Interestingly, Andi and Paige do not specifically address which forces help to create the frameworks they use to determine which personal experiences are more meaningful and instructive than others.

A number of the graduate teaching assistants suggested comparison (i.e., comparing students against other students or juxtaposing one's students against one's own experiences as a student) as one of the key factors in their developing understandings of educational success. For example:

> I've gauged successful students by other students. You know, my classes last semester set a standard for my classes this semester (Francis, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> I consider my background because my background determines what I expect of a successful student… I kind of look at how I behaved when I was that age, and if I was even—if I were given such a chance, would I blow it if I had such a good teacher?… A lot of [my students] say, "ok, my mother didn't have a college education. I'm the first in my family to do this in spite of all that."… I think they are highly motivated, and in spite of all that, they keep cutting classes, and I say, it's going to be very difficult for you to be a success with that kind of attitude. So that's the kind of background I am talking about. I look at how I have interacted. How I would behave, other students I have taught (Frank, GTA group, 3/10/99).

> And I had to overcome my ideas of what a successful student was when I entered the classroom as a teacher because my expectation—because what I walked in with in

> that classroom were my expectations of myself as a student. I had to really expand that definition in a lot of ways, after I was confronted with a classroom of people who are very, very different from the kind of student that I was (Wendy, GTA group, 3/24/99).

Graduate teaching assistants are not the only participants to describe the influence of comparisons. The undergraduates I interviewed, in addition to identifying the ways in which they reflect upon their own past performance to guide current and future action, also expressed that they evaluate teachers according to their experiences with a diverse and varied group of teachers throughout their lives.

The participants in this study underscore the importance of individuals to developing and fostering particular definitions or assessments of educational outcomes. This is not surprising; most people have long since realized that they are enmeshed in a variety of social relationships. However, each of these examples also underscores the primacy of the speaker in evaluating and taking to heart another person's suggestions and expectations. When Andi and Paige articulate the importance of their own individual assessments of past performance, they do not particularly address the ways in which those assessments are influenced by other factors. Moreover, each participant foregrounds the ways in which even the process of definition formation is structured by an individual. For example, while Francis uses external criteria for assessment, namely comparisons with others, he takes that particular course of action for himself.

It is interesting, therefore, in light of the ways in which participants underscore individual actions, that participants often deferred understandings of educational success or non-success to the purview of nebulous social and organizational systems. For example, while most participants did not articulate popular cultural influences as significant to their own experiences and assumptions, those that did characterized it as a force that permeates, and perhaps even distorts, beliefs about what education (or teaching, or studenting…) should be:

> I was thinking about like Dead Poet's Society and Stand and Deliver and all those films and the thing is, you know, they make me cry. Robin Williams is such a wonderful teacher. I tear up, but, I mean, it is a very cliched sort of understanding of the sort of ideal classroom interaction that happens (Wendy, GTA group, 3/24/99).

> I was just thinking about a student who was late and who had done something, was working on his speech, and we walked across campus talking about his speech, and as we departed, he looked at me and said, "You know, this is what college is supposed to be about. I'm supposed to be able to walk with my professor across campus talking about great ideas." If you call a speech on Jimmy Buffet a great idea, but still… He was

so excited. It was that whole romantic version that you get in the media of how it's supposed to be" (Betty, GTA group, 3/24/99).

I think the kids today and, I think, even our generation, watching cartoons and TV and stuff and seeing people jump around and go crazy and have fun on TV, they kind of expect teachers to be like that and they're not (Dean, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

These excerpts suggest a suspicious, or perhaps critical, understanding of the influence of popular cultural sources. Wendy, Betty and Dean each articulate the suspicion that popular cultural influences offer romanticized, and thus misleading, visions of what education can and should be. Given that the participants self-reported their own perspectives for this study, it would be difficult or impossible to determine the effect popular cultural influences have upon the lives of both students and teachers. It is important to note, however, that the participants in this study, for the most part, do not believe that popular cultural or media influences have shaped their understandings of and expectations for various aspects of their educational experience. However, I believe that Wendy, Betty and Dean each, in her or his own way, allude to the illusory influence of such forces; perhaps participants are more strongly affected by this feature of their environments than at first they realize.

There is, throughout this study, a tension between individuals and social systems. Ever present in the interviews is a desire for personal, individual assessment of progress toward educational goals; however, this desire is frequently tempered by a suspicion that such internal assessments mean nothing in light of structural or institutional constraints. For example, when Taylor, in one of the undergraduate student focus groups, argues with Chase that what an aviation student thinks about his or her success doesn't matter, but rather what American Airlines thinks about that student that matters, she foregrounds external, systemic expectations over individual goals. This is not to suggest that there should not be standards for airplane pilots, or that I would be comfortable with a pilot's assurances that she or he is successful rather than her or his compliance with and excellence in federal testing and licensing. However, this is to say that it is a feature of these interviews that participants tend to articulate an understanding of success and nonsuccess that situates them outside of active participation in educational and social systems. For example:

...if everybody did that [behaviors the group ascribed to a successful student] then there is going to be a couple of people that are going to get pushed aside, you know what

> I mean? If everybody is trying to get up there, as you get older, competition gets harder, and you get pushed back (Brenna, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).
>
> [Becoming a student] is part of being inducted into that particular culture. You have to go through these things. If you want to play basketball, the first thing you would probably do is get physically fit, mow the lawn, or keep the court clean. If you want to be an actress or something, you would be a stage hand, and you would do the sweeping and all those things. You can't say, hey I'm here to learn acting, not to do these things. So, if the university has a particular culture, and I say English composition, rhetoric, oral communication is…an important aspect of your education. You don't get to choose that. You just go through those things (Frank, GTA group, 3/10/99).
>
> Well, nowadays, college is pretty much you have to go (Taylor, undergraduate group, 4/7/99).

Each of these excerpts illustrates the ways in which participants for themselves obscure the workings of the educational system. Brenna does not explain who pushes back, who creates a scarcity of resources such that only a certain number of people can, by her definition, be successful. Frank does not identify who creates and sustains a university's requirements; he simply states that students have no choice but to comply with existing institutional constraints. Taylor does not say who says people have to go to college. And, in each of these instances, the participants do not articulate their own roles that they play in the on-going re-creation and maintenance of existing educational practices.

Alienation and resistance: (Re)constructing "the system"

Participants in this study did not offer stable, uniform definitions of educational success and non-success or failure.[5] For example, participants did not always equate success with completion or failure with leaving school, and, at times, participants were quick to note that there were not only costs incurred by leaving school but also by remaining (i.e., having to compartmentalize one's personal crises or placing one's academic obligations before physical health). Indeed, any semblance of stability to the participants' definitions of educational success is a reflection of their collective tensive oscillation between two different understandings: (1) educational success is measured by whether an individual is achieving her or his personal educational goals (e.g., learning to be a better writer or finding a sense of wonder about a given subject), and (2) educational success is measured by whether others can determine if an individual is meeting more institutionally-ascribed goals (e.g., doing what it takes to get an A,

get a degree, find a job).[6] In either instance, participants foregrounded the work of the individual in achieving educational success. For example, when Chase observes that being a successful student is "pretty much doing what you're asked to do," he foregrounds individual action—i.e., if a student wants to be successful, she or he simply needs to comply with others' requirements (Undergraduate group, 3/31/99). It is interesting to note, however, that Chase does not identify who sets those requirements.

Participants, in (re)constructing their definitions of educational success and non-success, articulated understandings of themselves as apart or alienated from the educational system. By this, I mean that participants did not often acknowledge their collective participation in social systems and, when they did acknowledge their participation, it was as if they wanted to convey that they were merely obeying pre-established and stable rules. One way in which participants did this was to articulate notions of educational success and non-success as a matter of individual accomplishment and perseverance (rather than as collective definition and validation). For example, when Andi (undergraduate group, 3/31/99) suggests that a student might define success as earning average grades without working very hard, or when Francis (GTA group, 3/10/99) argues that "in order to be successful, you have to want to learn. You have to want to be there," they are focusing on how an individual's actions or attitudes create success. They do not attend to the ways in which the individual must work in concert with other individuals to continually re-create understandings of success.

In each of these examples, the participants attend primarily to the power of the individual. This focus on the individual is not, in itself, surprising; there are numerous myths and traditions in American education, not to mention American culture, to sustain a belief in the rugged individualist who can pull her or himself up by the bootstraps. Historically, children and adults have been recognized and rewarded by parents, teachers, and employers for their ability to do their own work, on their own individual merit (Kohn, 1992, 1993). What is curious is the ways in which participants tended to foreground individual accomplishment in one moment, and then regard an individual's own interpretation of success with suspicion, turning to external, institutionally-posed or systemic criteria to validate that individual assessment. This may well be an instance of two sides to the same pervasive value; however rugged the individualist, she or he is only made into a hero or a martyr by others' rewards, admiration and attention.

This tension between the individual and the system is further illustrated by the ways in which participants described themselves as individuals coping within "the system" or as referring to "the system" as the benefactor of educational standards. For example, when Lucas describes his most overwhelming educational difficulty as a lack of "personal faith in my ability to do the system and personal faith in that I can keep my integrity and do the system," he describes himself as an individual caught up in a process larger than himself, one in which he might be lost (GTA group, 3/24/99). John describes the system as a source for definition when he states "I derive the word success from what I know from the system" (GTA group, 3/24/99). While both participants acknowledge the role of "the system" in their lives, they construct the educational system as a static thing, something that pre-exists them temporally, and upon which they exert little, if any, control. Defining educational systems in this way, as rigid and sedimented artifacts, appears to make it difficult for participants to hold alternate conceptualizations, such as a notion of educational systems as fluid and highly stylized or choreographed relationships between people. If students and teachers fail to discursively recognize that what they describe as the educational system is actually systems of, or relationships between, people, then they preclude their own ability to effect change in those systems.

Directions for Future Research

That participants in this study both construct definitions (of educational success and failure, of educational systems) and mask the process of construction (making such definitions seem stable and natural) through communication, suggests the possibility of a significant role for communication studies scholars in both the study and potential reform of educational systems. Future research will need to demonstrate that the findings of this study are more broadly generalizable, but even at this exploratory stage, there are a number of implications for educational reform. First, educational reform will not be simple, not that it currently is. At a minimum, people concerned with education reform must be aware of the ways in which educational systems are inextricable from the values and assumptions from which they emerge. Second, people concerned with educational reform will need to explore language which accommodates tension more effectively (i.e., we need to find a way to discuss individuals' implication or participation in social systems that doesn't reduce those systems to unassailable structures).

Furthermore, this study also suggests implications for communication pedagogy research. In her article "Expanding the Research Agenda for Instructional Communication: Raising Some Unasked Questions," Sprague (1992) offers a rationale for why instructional communication scholars have lagged behind their colleagues in education; she observes that they are "turning inward, addressing themselves to narrow discourse communities of other scholars assumed to have a context for the particular piece of published research" (p. 2). Rather than engaging a variety of approaches to research, such scholars have clung tightly to vestiges of psychology, neglecting the possible contributions of other disciplines, such as anthropology or philosophy, and, in effect, reinscribing what they perceive to be traditional and superior. In many ways, this study is a response to Sprague's call for expansion. In addition to (critically) embracing the critical tradition in education, my work attempts to address some of Sprague's "unasked questions," such as the degree to which our existing research practices may be dehumanizing to and dismissive of students and teachers (p. 5), or the role of language as constitutive of educational phenomena (p. 13).

Given that educational systems are complex relationships between people, then the medium that creates and maintains such systems of individuals is communication. If, through our everyday discourse, we blind ourselves to the ways in which these systems of people work in us, through us, and because of us, then we significantly compromise our collective agency even as we feel that we are in greater control of our individual lives. This is not to suggest that people are simple dupes, nor that it is impossible to make changes to educational systems. Instead, this is to suggest that there are no simple answers. Communication scholars must work to foreground the role of communication in the creation and maintenance of both helpful and harmful social systems and collective assumptions.

References

Albrecht, T. L., Johnson, G. M., & Walther, J. B. (1993). Understanding communication processes in focus groups. In D. Morgan (Ed.), Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art (pp. 51-64). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Blount, H., & Wells, M. (1992). Battering children educationally. Contemporary Education, 64, 21-24.

Carger, C.L. (1996). Of borders and dreams: A Mexican-American experience of urban education. New York: Teachers College Press.

Chesebro, J. W., McCroskey, J. C., Atwater, D. F., Bahrenfuss, R. M., Cawelti, G. Gaudino, J. L., & Hodges, H. (1992). Communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence of at-risk students. Communication Education, 41, 345-360.

Darling, A., & Abrams, G. (1989). Making the difference: How speech communication TAs can assist African-American students at-risk. Paper presented to the Central States Communication Association, Kansas City, MO.

Fine, M. (1991). Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school. New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Flores, J. G., & Alonso, C. G. (1995). Using focus groups in educational research. Evaluation Review, 19, 84-101.

Frey, J. H. & Fontana, A. (1993). The group interview in social research. In D. Morgan (Ed.), Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art (pp. 20-34). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Frymier, J., Barber, L., Carriedo, R., Denton, W., Gansneder, B., Johnson-Lewis, S., & Robertson, N. (1992). Growing up is risky business, and schools are not to blame. Final report—Phi Delta Kappa study of students at-risk, volume 1. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa.

Gorham, J, & Self, L. (1986). Developing communication skills: Learning style and the educationally disadvantaged student. Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

Groening, M. (1 June 1993). [Cartoon]. UCSD Guardian.

Groening, M. (1987). School is hell. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Jarrett, R. L. (1994). Living poor: Family live among single parent, African-American women. Sociological Problems, 41, 30-49.

Jarrett, R. L. (1993). Focus group interviewing with low-income, minority populations: A research experience. In D. Morgan (Ed.), Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art (pp. 184-201). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Johnson, G.M. (1994). An ecological framework for conceptualizing educational risk. Urban Education, 29, 34-49.

Johnson, G., Staton, A., & Jorgensen-Earp, C. (1995). An ecological perspective on the transition of new university freshmen. Communication Education, 44, 336-352.

Kohn, A. (1993). Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Kohn, A. (1992). No contest: The case against competition (2nd Ed.). New York, Houghton Mifflin.

Krueger, R. A. (1994). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

McLaren, P. (1993). Schooling as ritual performance: Towards a political economy of educational symbols and gestures (3rd Ed.). London, U.K.: Routledge.

McLaurin, P. (1995). An examination of the effect of culture on pro-social messages directed at African-American at-risk youth. Communication Monographs, 62, 301-326.

McMillan, J., & Reed, D. (1994). At-risk students and resiliency: Factors contributing to academic success. The Clearing House, 137-140.

Mirman, J., Swartz, R., & Barell, J. (1988). Strategies to help teachers empower at-risk students. In B. Presseisen, (Ed.), At-risk students and thinking: Perspectives from research, (pp. 138-156). Washington, DC: NEA/RBS.

Morgan, D. L. (1997). Focus groups as qualitative research (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. Annual Review of Sociology, 22, 129-153.

Nelson, B., Dunn, R., Griggs, S. A., Primavera, L., Fitzpatrick, M., Bacilious, Z., & Miller, R. (1993). Effects of learning style intervention on college students' retention and achievement. Journal of College Student Development, 34, 364-369.

Nunn, G., & Parish, T. (1992). The psychosocial characteristics of at-risk high school students. Adolescence, 27, 435-439.

Plaut, T., Landis, S. & Trevor, J. (1993). Focus groups and community mobilization: A case study from rural North Carolina. In D. Morgan (Ed.), Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art (pp. 202-221). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Presseisen, B. (1988). Teaching thinking and at-risk students: Defining a population. In B. Presseisen, (Ed.), At-risk students and thinking: Perspectives from Research, (pp. 19-37). Washington, DC: NEA/RBS.

Proctor, R. F., Douglas, A. T., Garera-Izquierdo, T., & Wartman, S. L. (1994). Approach, avoidance, and apprehension: Talking with high-CA students about getting help. Communication Education, 43, 312-321.

Rosenfeld, L., Grant, C., & McCroskey, J. (1995). Communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence of academically gifted students. Communication Education, 44, 79-86.

Rosenfeld, L. B. & Richman, J. M. (1999). Supportive communication and school outcomes, Part II: Academically "at-risk" low income high school students. Communication Education, 48, 294-307.

Rosenfeld, L. B., Richman, J. M., & Bowen, G. L. (1998). Supportive communication and school outcomes for academically "at-risk" and other low income middle school students. Communication Education, 47, 309-325.

Rosow, L. (1989). Arthur: A tale of disempowerment. Phi Delta Kappan, 71, 194-199.

Sapon-Shevin, M., & Schniedewind, N. (1991). Cooperative learning as empowering pedagogy. In C. Sleeter (Ed.), Empowerment through multicultural education, (pp. 159-317). New York: SUNY Press.

Sprague, J. A. (1992). Expanding the research agenda for instructional communication: Raising some unasked questions. Communication Education, 41, 1-25.

Souza, T. J. (1999). Communication and alternative school student socialization. Communication Education, 48, 91-108.

Stewart, D. W. & Shamdasani, P. N. (1990). Focus groups: Theory and practice. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Swadener, B. B. (1995). Children and families "at promise": Deconstructing the discourse of risk. In B. Swadener & S. Lubeck (Eds.), Children and families "at promise" (pp. 17-49). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Valdés, G. (1996). Con respeto: Bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools. New York: Teachers College Press.

Willis, P. (1977). Learning to labor. Lexington, KY: D.C. Heath.

Winborne, D., & Dardaine-Ragguet, P. (1993). Parallels and divergence in the at-risk/mainstream conversation: Adolescent voices. The High School Journal, 195-203.

[1] While the notion that students not only suffer through their schooling but also suffer as a result of their schooling is a serious indictment of the educational system, it is not without precedent. Michelle Fine (1991), focusing on urban public school students, found that "stay-ins" (i.e., students who stayed in high school until graduation) were significantly more depressed and conformist than their counterparts who left school. In direct contrast to drop-outs, stay-ins were more likely to state "My problems are due to my personality" and more likely to state "If a teacher gave me a B, I would do nothing about it; teachers are always right" (p. 4). While not accounting for all retention/attrition differences among urban school students, Fine's provocative work suggests that there are not only costs associated with leaving school, but also costs incurred by remaining. Consequently, Fine (1991) posits that "The act of dropping out could be recast as a strategy for taking control of lives fundamentally out of control" (p. 4).

[2] Researchers have pursued a variety of research questions in their effort to understand and ameliorate educational failure. Their methods for finding answers to their questions have been equally diverse—quantitative and qualitative, experimental and naturalistic, conventional and critical. While scholars have come to learn more about educational risk through careful reviews and inquiries into existing work (e.g., Blount & Wells, 1992; Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 1994; Presseisen, 1989; Sapon-Shevin & Schniedewind, 1991), others have engaged in focus group interviews (e.g., Johnson, Staton & Jorgensen-Earp, 1995; McLaurin, 1995; Proctor et al., 1994), ethnography (e.g., Carger, 1996; Souza, 1999; Valdés, 1996) and critical ethnography (e.g., Fine, 1991; McLaren, 1993; Willis, 1977), self-reflection on their own experiences working with students at risk (e.g., Gill, 1992; Mirman, Swartz & Barell, 1988; Rosow, 1989) and experimental measurement and assessment (e.g., Darling & Abrams, 1989; Gorham & Self, 1986; Nelson, et al., 1993; Nunn & Parish, 1992; Winborne & Dardaine-Ragguet, 1993; Chesebro et al., 1992; Rosenfeld, Grant, & McCroskey, 1995; Rosenfeld & Richman, 1999; Rosenfeld, Richman & Bowen, 1998).

[3] Here I do not wish to imply that formal education in the United States is of little value and universally hurtful to all who experience it. I doubt that I could even make such a case, given that two-thirds of my life is inextricably connected to formal education; who I am in the world is, in large measure, a result of how I embrace and resist the people and ideas I have met in the classroom. Instead, I argue that people concerned with educational reform must consider not only the elusive tenaciousness of Americans' attitudes and beliefs regarding the educational system, but also the ways in which our very discourse (as researchers, teachers and students) tends to mask the processes by which we came to construct and uphold those attitudes and beliefs.

[4] Focus groups are a particularly useful method for culling stories regarding participant experiences, beliefs, and values. In addition to eliciting information in response to the interview protocol, the focus group interview also affords researchers an opportunity to observe communication behaviors in process (e.g., the ways in which given groups function, the ways in which language is employed in the different groups to facilitate sense-making, and so on). Focus groups have been widely used in a variety of academic disciplines, including sociology (Jarrett, 1993 & 1994; Morgan, 1992), education (Flores & Alonso, 1995), health (Plaut et al., 1993) and communication studies (Albrecht et al., 1993; Johnson et al., 1995; McLaurin, 1995; Proctor et al., 1994).

It is surprising that, given the inherently communicative nature of focus group interviewing, more communication studies scholars have not explored it as a possible method. There are many advantages to focus group research. To name just a few—focus groups: (1) can be flexible and open-ended, allowing data, the participants' own words, to give rise to theory, (2) permit the researcher to interact in the creation and interrogation of research questions, (3) help the researcher determine whether s/he is pursuing a fruitful line of inquiry, and (4) may be cost-effective (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). While not entirely naturalistic in orientation—participants are brought together, perhaps in an unfamiliar setting, to answer questions posed by the researcher—focus groups are less structured and more open to participant meanings than conventional experimental research designs.

[5] I must note here that, in my analysis of participant interviews, I infer participants understandings of educational failure from how they articulate their understandings of educational success and non-success. In creating the research protocol for this study, I chose not to invoke failure as the opposite of success because I felt that to pre-establish such a common opposition would make it difficult for the participants to propose alternatives to educational success and failure. For example, I wondered whether participants would use the expression "at-risk" in their own talk (they did not).

[6] In other words, if educational success and failure are phase-like, in that they may be co-present in any student at any time, then educational risk or "at-riskness" is phase-like as well. Unfortunately researchers, and institutions

such as universities which rely upon such research, tend to categorize students en masse as "at-risk" or not. To do so is problematic in that when researchers and institutions define risk as an identifiable attribute (as opposed to risk defined as in flux) they fail to consider the ways in which every single student is potentially at risk (of failure, of not learning, of not integrating fully into the social atmosphere of the campus, of not realizing the complexity of the ways in which they shape and are shaped by their educations). Furthermore, when researchers and institutions focus their attention upon those students they have designated as at-risk, they tend to offer piece-meal corrections to the educational system (i.e., remedial or compensatory programs) rather than considering change to the educational system in its entirety.